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ABSTRACT

An intermediate-level university French course in Greek mythology was developed to (1) improve student skills in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehending French, (2) familiarize students with Greek mythology, and (3) prepare students to deal better with allusions to Greek mythology in French literature. The texts used are a French translation of Edith Hamilton's classic "Greek Mythology" and a grammar review text designed for American students. Students are encouraged to read the mythology text in both French and English and make comparisons. The course is not difficult for a teacher of French to teach, and its content is closely related to classical French culture. It also serves as an introduction to Greek culture, and the course has been used by some students for credit in the humanities rather than French. Students at this academic level are ready to undertake content-area material in French. Classroom activities consist of discussion of literary and linguistic aspects of the mythology text. Emphasis is placed on understanding both written and oral French. The course could be adapted to secondary school French instruction, especially for students with an ongoing interest in French studies. (MSE)

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Teaching for Content:

Greek Mythology in French

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Teaching for Content:

Greek Mythology in French

1.1. Teaching content materials in foreign languages is an idea that surfaces from time to time[1] but which unfortunately never gets very far, for several reasons: A) The foreign language teacher may not feel sufficiently qualified in a subject outside the field of foreign languages to teach; B) students may not be sufficiently qualified to take such a class (i.e., vocabulary may simply be beyond them); C) in the rare event that both students and teachers do possess the prerequisite knowledge, teachers of other disciplines may not be comfortable with the idea that someone outside their discipline is teaching it, even though they are not teaching it in English.

1.2. And yet reports of such classes having been taught do exist[2]. Warriner reported that a high school course in government and another one in biology had been taught in German, and U.S. history in French in 1965[3]. This paper is a report of a similar course which has been taught eight semesters since 1978, and which encountered and overcame the three potential obstacles mentioned above for reasons which will become apparent in the discussion below.

2.1 The title of the course was Greek Mythology in French (GMF). It was taught at the third-year university level as an intermediate composition and conversation class.

But it's unabashed goal was to respond to counter obstacle C. listed in paragraph 1.1. above, by providing content material of a sufficiently sophisticated nature that no student, teacher or administrator would question it as being "low level." More than just a few adolescent or near adult students of foreign languages often complain that reading tasks are too low in intellectually stimulating material; others simply find vocabulary too rich and varied to permit reading comprehension. The reading material for the GMF course is a French translation of Edith Hamilton's classic, Greek Mythology, a well-known and widely accepted introduction to the field. Some students may already have read the original in English in junior or high school, but this is considered a positive reason for choosing this text, rather than a negative one. By re-reading material which they may have already read, students understand the text better, even if it is in a foreign language. In addition, since it is expected that they will already know the "story line," context will be much richer than if the students are reading a text with which they are totally unfamilair. This enriched context greatly facilitates comprehension of the foreign language text. More important yet, students find that they can guess the meaning of a great deal of vocabulary from context, because they understand the context better. Finally, much of this vocabulary rapidly becomes "active" and "usable" vocabulary for the student, rather

than remaining at the level of "passively recognizable" vocabulary because he has a greater context to which he is able to attach it.

2.2. Although no formal test was run to determine students' comprehension of the material, the author frequently questioned students to determine their feelings regarding reading the text in both French and English. Most of them expressed positive reactions. They also warned the author, however, that some students had a tendency to read only the English text, and not to compare it to the French text, particularly as the semester progressed and pressure to complete papers and pass tests in other classes accumulated. In some cases the author felt that these students constituted a confession of guilt, while in others it was a complaint that other students were "cutting corners." Ways to deal with this problem will require further thought.

2.3. Following are details on various aspects of the course, together with advantages it presents. This paragraph and the following one will answer questions one and two which were posed in paragraph 1.1. First, this course is not particularly difficult for a teacher of French to teach. Although it is not French literature nor French culture or history, its content is closely related to and serves as an excellent adjunct to classical French culture, literature and graphic art[4]. Many American students have

only the vaguest knowledge of Greek mythology. Rather than take time to introduce it to them in a French literature course, where time is already at a premium, it has seemed advantageous to present it in a more leisurely but more thorough manner, in this course here described.

2.4. Second, students who have studied two years of French at the post secondary level are or should be ready to begin reading authentic written texts, understand lectures in French, learn to take lecture notes in French, participate in class discussions in French, and write papers and exams in French. Of course the teacher cannot expect all of these activities to be of the same quality as they would be if they were conducted in the students' native language. But since teachers of content material classes are being encouraged and requested more and more frequently to teach not only the content itself but also good English usage, especially in exams, we foreign language teachers are certainly justified in concerning ourselves with composition and conversation in the content course under consideration here. In addition, the author suspects a positive spin-off of learning to write better in French will be improved writing in English.

2.5. One of the most beneficial aspects of this course, in addition to those involving improvement of the language and better comprehension of the connection between Greek mythology and French culture, is the fact that it

serves as an introduction to Greek literature, with the tremendously important implications that has for understanding all of Western culture and history. In fact, our university has already allowed General Education Humanities credit for this course on condition, of course, that it not be likewise counted toward the major or minor. This ruling has not only allowed the our French major students to have more exposure to French than they would normally have by filling the major or minor requirements for a course in intermediate composition and conversation, but it has also allowed some students who decide not to major or minor in French to salvage this course in terms of Humanities credit, rather than simply general elective credit.

3.1. How is the class run? We use two books: (1) a grammar review workbook, entitled Grammaire Française pour Etudiants Américains, specifically designed by the author of the present article to help American native speakers of English obtain a good grasp of the terminology of grammar in both English and French and to call to his/her attention the principal points of French grammar that cause problems for native speakers of English. (2) Hamilton's book, from which we read short selections. Classroom activities consist of discussion of linguistic and literary aspects of Hamilton's text: difficulties in comprehension in the first case, and character development and story line in the second.

3.2. Selections read generally include the following:

Introduction: The Greek Gods and Goddesses

The Heroes of the Trojan War

The Quest of the Golden Fleece

The Royal House of Oedipus

The House of Athens

3.3. While important goals of the course are to familiarize students with Greek mythology and Greek literature and to prepare the student to better deal with allusions to Greek mythology in French literature, the most important goal of the course is to improve the students' ability to read, write, speak and comprehend French. Classroom activities and tests reflect these goals and the course is as student-centered as possible. However, the course does not reflect current oral proficiency procedures totally: students generally practice discussing characters and situations as observers/reporters (i.e. from a third person point of view) and only rarely as actors (i.e. from a first person point of view). This does not mean however, that we have no small group discussions (i.e. one-on-one) role playing or other communicative activities. Most speaking involves recounting what one has read about, however. In addition, emphasis is placed on understanding written French forms with which the students have not had a great deal of contact: the passe simple and the past tenses of the subjunctive, such as the imperfect subjunctive and

the pluperfect subjunctive. Students encounter these forms in their readings a good deal more frequently than they would were they reading most of the other readers available for French study on the market today. It is reasoned that if they continue to study literature, they are going to need to be able to recognize those forms. Students are not required to learn to use these forms, but are required to learn to translate them into English. When we discuss our readings, however, we change to a conversational tone, using passe compose and present subjunctive, rather than the literary forms.

4.1. Adapting this course to a third and/or fourth year high school French course would not be difficult and would increase the level of preparation for the student who wishes to integrate a strong content component as well as skills development into his French major, minor or general studies program.

4.2. A list of questions to serve as the basis for leading class discussion is available from the author of this article upon request. In addition, a list of visual material is available from the author, which would make it possible to add an important element of art history to the course, thus enriching it even further. It has also been the author's experience that this course has served to whet students' appetites for a study of the history of Greece and Rome. It would be natural for a teacher of French to give

such a history course in French after giving the course in Greek mythology in French. Yet another dimension could be added, particularly for an upper-division undergraduate honors course or a graduate course, by using the following text rather than Hamilton's text as the reader: Le Symbolisme dans la mythologie grecque, Paul Diel, Payot, Paris, 1952, 1966, 1981, translated into English as Symbolism in Greek Mythology, Shambhala, Boulder, Colorado, distributed in the USA by Random House, Inc., 1980.

ENDNOTES

[1] Language and Content, Bernard Mahon, Addison & Wesley, Reading, Mass., 1985, is the only booklength study on the issue, and has appeared only within the past year.

[2] Cantieni, Graham and Tremblay, Roger. "The Use of Concrete Mathematical Situations in Learning a Second Language: A Dual Learning Concept." TESOLO, v. 7, #3, pp. 279-88. Sep 1973. Lewis, Paul Gilbert. "An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Teaching of Foriegn Literature." Modern Language Journal, v. 60, #5-6, pp. 251-253, Sep-Oct 1976. No author listed. "Descriptions of Selected Interdisciplinary College Courses." Foreign Language Annals, v. 10, #1, pp. 33-43, Feb 1977. No author listed. "Descriptions of Selected Interdisciplinary in

Literature." Foreign Language Annals, v. 9, #6, pp. 530-36, Dec 1976. Renzo, Titone. "Foreign Language Teaching -- Island or Continent." System, v. 7, #2, p. 159, Aug 1979.

[3]Warriner, Helen. The Effectiveness of the Use of Foreign Languages in Teaching Academic Subjects: A Research Contribution to Educational Planning. Richmond, Virginia. Division of Educational Resources, Virginia State Department of Education, 1968. ERIC No. ED028677. See also Ort, Barbara A. and Smith, Dwight R. "The Language Teacher Tours the Curriculum: New Horizons for Foreign Language Education." Foreign Language Annals, v. 3, #1, pp. 28-74, Oct 1969.

[4]French classical literature is easier to understand if one has a good grasp of Greek mythology.